SIMEON

December 31, 2006
First United Church of Oak Park, IL
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

What an interesting time the week after Christmas is! The child in each of us invested weeks, months, waiting, anticipating. The adult in us worked very hard. There were trees to be selected, carried home, decorated or assembled: crèches, and candles, Santa Claus and Frosty to place strategically. There were plans to be made, involving incredibly complex logistics: parties and celebrations to attend, Christmas cards to be signed and addressed, gifts to be chosen with care, purchased and mailed — at a time when everybody else is doing the same thing — so it always took twice as much time as we anticipated. There were delightful Christmas pageants to attend and we watched through teary eyes as precious children and grandchildren portrayed the angels we know they are, singing "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace." I don't suppose a one of us heard that — "on earth, peace," sung by a five year old —without a catch in our throat as we pondered the daily news about all the places on earth where there is no peace, and said a silent prayer that somehow this wonderful five-year-old will experience the peace we so desperately yearn for. There was food to prepare and share and enjoy: glorious food, favorite food for Christmas — turkey, all the trimmings unique to our families.

All in all it is a glorious — but physically and emotionally demanding — time for everyone. Then, relatively quickly, it is over.

On the subject of "after Christmas," I have always loved delightful lines from W. H. Auden's *Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being*:

> "Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
> Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes . . .
> The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
> And the children got ready for school. There are enough
> Leftovers to do, warmed up, for the rest of the week--
> Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
> Stayed up so late, attempted--quite unsuccessfully--
> To love all of our relatives, and in general
> Grossly overestimated our powers."

And so sometime during the past week, or next several days, perhaps today, we will take a deep breath, exhale slowly, — sigh — in contentment or frustration, sigh in a delightful sense of accomplishment, sigh that we have survived, done what we intended and hoped to do and, if not — if we

never got to the signing of the cards, if one dish never made it, it is too late now. And so we sigh.

One of my favorite incidents in the Bible occurs when an old man and old woman sigh. It is in the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. It is a remarkable bit of writing in which we are introduced to an unforgettable cast of characters: old Zechariah and Elizabeth, waiting all their lives for a child: Zechariah, the priest, struck dumb when he cannot and will not believe that his wife will conceive: Elizabeth, mature, wise, gracious, who goes into confinement as her pregnancy becomes a visible reality, and into that confinement welcomes her young relative, Mary of Nazareth, also unexpectedly pregnant, but also inconveniently, awkwardly, scandalously not married: Elizabeth who will greet her young niece with words themselves pregnant — "Hail, Mary, full of grace. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Mary — young, frightened, faithful, strong, courageous; Joseph, her husband who does something so quietly that we often miss its courage and goodness: takes a pregnant teenager, whose pregnancy is not his responsibility, as his wife. Luke introduces us to an innkeeper, a crowd of guests, shepherds on the hillside and a multitude of angels singing in the night. And at the end, old Simeon and Anna.

Mary and Joseph have traveled the short distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. One cannot hear this story without pondering the irony and the tragedy of those two cities and what they represent: a high concrete wall between them, a journey from one to the other, an excruciating ordeal, sometimes not even possible.

Mary and Joseph have traveled the short distance to go to the Temple. The Law of Moses required a woman who had given birth to present herself in the Temple for a purification ritual. And the law also stipulated that a first born male baby was to be presented and dedicated to God. Joseph and Mary are observant Jews. They have come to the Temple to take care of both responsibilities. While there they meet, in the outer court, Simeon and Anna.

Luke says they are devout. They spend a lot of their time around the Temple. They attend every public liturgy, public prayers, sacrifices. They help out as they are able. Every congregation has to have a few Simeons and Annas.

The language is interesting. When old Simeon sees Mary and Joseph and the baby, maybe six weeks old he "receives the infant Jesus with his bent arm" is the literal translation. He cradles the child.

What a great moment that is. Grandparents know all about it. There is simply nothing quite like holding, cradling an infant — it's particularly nice if the infant is your own grandchild. Somewhere deep in us, even if we are not parents or grandparents, we know all about what is happening here. William Willimon says "Somewhere within our deepest selves, we know that we need babies. Some deep human instinct tells us that babies are a sign of our human creativity at its best."

A few days before Christmas there was a wonderful little essay on the Editorial page of the *Tribune* by David McGrath, professor of English, Emeritus, at the College of DuPage. The author remembers a Christmas Eve long ago when he was 19, had a serious girlfriend, the keys to the family car, a gift in his pocket and big plans which included driving to Navy Pier where he would gift her the gold chain he had purchased. His strategy was to make a brief appearance at his family's Christmas Eve traditional celebration which included a meal, and then an extended time of gift giving, unwrapping, oohing and aahing — that went on for hours. His plan was to show up briefly, greet everyone and leave for the carefully planned romantic rendezvous. His mother, however, had another agenda — she interrupted his careful planning by asking him to drive to his grandmother's house and help her into the car and bring her to the party. It was bitterly cold. And so — he did what he had to do — now terribly unhappy because his carefully planned romantic evening at Navy Pier was clearly at risk.

His grandmother was, he says, "a big, lumbering, slow, asthmatic Polish lady" who also suffered from Parkinson's." As they drove she tried to make conversation with her clearly unhappy grandson. When they arrived at his parents' home, as soon as he helped her out of the car into the icy night air, she began to wheeze and gasp and ordered him to wait until she caught her breath. Afraid she might have a heart attack, he suggested that they get back into the car and that he take her home. Before he finished talking she was shaking her head, her chest heaving.

"The eyes," she said. "I need to see their eyes."

He knew — she meant the little ones — his baby sister and young cousins. "Their eyes shining with innocence and wonder . . . the happiness and hope contained in their young lives."

Professor McGrath remembers, a generation later, "A sick old woman braving ice and cold to see the children's eyes on Christmas Eve. All she had endured for 80 years, all that she had seen and known, and this is what she wanted. This is what it is all about."

How very wise of God to choose to come to us in a way we cannot resist. How wise of God to speak a word that needs no academic analysis, no scholarly exegesis: . . . a child.

Old Simeon held the child and prayed: "Master, you are dismissing your servant in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation." The older, more familiar version has been sung nightly in monasteries for centuries: the Nunc Dimittis . . .

> "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Something like that happens at every baptism, I think. There are sound theological reasons why Presbyterians and Congregationalists and other Reformed types baptize infants. It is a clear and eloquent way to affirm our belief and trust in God's grace and love that comes to each and every one of us apart from anything we have done and long before we have heard of it or know much of anything beyond our own needs. And there are good sound reasons for our insistence that baptism is a public event, and belongs in worship with a congregation present; that baptism is actually a function of the whole church, not just the clergy, that it requires a community. And there is also deeply personal wisdom, too. Something deep in us is touched when a baby is held by a minister, held for all of us, when the minister says for all of us: "Alex, you are a child of God — you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Some deep reservoir of goodness and hope is tapped in each of us. Something not far from Simeon's words:

> "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

It is also an affirmation of our adult responsibility for our children. They are entrusted to us for a brief period of time. We are all they have going for them for a while at least. And that responsibility comes with social and political and economic — as well as emotional, spiritual responsibility. We are all they have — and they are our most important responsibility. Their health and welfare, their safety and security, their education — there are simply no more important priorities for the body politic. And so people of faith, people who participate in the baptism of infants on Sunday, have an obligation on Monday, when politicians talk, for instance, about public school funding and the shameful gap between what we are willing to spend for educating a child in Oak Park and a poor child, and Operation Head Start and available day care. People who baptize on Sunday have an obligation on Monday — when it comes to the disgrace of children without adequate health care. When the politicians threaten to shut down a National Institute of Health major, multi-year study of childhood diseases, which is what the current administration is threatening

to do . . . , a study that the medical community knows will result in life enhancing, life-saving knowledge — people of faith need to make good on their part of the baptism bargain.

What did Simeon see when he held the infant Jesus in his arms? He saw a young mother perhaps still a little shaky on her feet: a father, perhaps impatient to get back to work in his carpenter shop.

And for a moment Simeon saw a great deal more.

He saw that God comes into human life, not in ways we expect, with fanfare and grandeur, banners unfurled, trumpets blaring: God comes quietly, in the ordinariness of human life. Simeon saw that God is present to us, not solely in religious ritual and practice, regardless of how beautiful and profound, but in the common stuff of this life of ours. God comes in human love — in its beauty and passion: in human striving, and hoping. God comes in the ordinary miracle of human birth.

And Simeon saw that the essence of God is not what everybody always thought — power beyond imagination, majesty, awesomeness, glory. He saw, momentarily at least, that the essence of God is vulnerable love, love that lives for the other, love that suffers, selflessly, for the other, love that will lay down life itself for the other. Momentarily, at least, as he cradled the child, Simeon saw that God is willing to die — so that we might live.

And Simeon saw hope — hope for the future, but also hope so personal that he could say, in essence, "All right — I have seen what love is, I have seen the love with which God loves me and all of us, and I'm ready to go now. I have seen that there is nothing to fear or dread, because all that is in front of me now is that love."

Among my personal treasures is the small, faded snapshot of my 90 year old grandfather, my father, and me in my twenties. My grandfather is holding my first born. Another treasure is a memory of my mother, barely conscious, in her hospital bed, not long before she died, her first great-grandchild, 6 months old, presented to her, sitting next to her. She is smiling weakly, patting the child's arm.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace."

It is a great moment when we hold a child in our arms.

When Simeon held the infant he saw, for a moment at least, the staggering notion that God is like this: that God comes to us, quietly, in the weakness and vulnerability of a child.

He saw, that is to say, the revolutionary notion that there is power in weakness and in vulnerability: and that love, God’s love, is that ultimate reality from which nothing — nothing in creation, not even death, can separate us.

“My eyes have seen my salvation,” old Simeon said . . . and yours — and mine as well. Thanks be to God.